CHAPTER I

THE DOMESDAY BOOK

Anyone who works upon the Domesday Book very soon has two views about it. On the one hand, he can have nothing but admiration for what is probably the most remarkable statistical document in the history of Europe. The continent has no document to compare with this detailed description covering so great a stretch of territory. And the geographer, as he turns over the folios, with their details of population and plough-teams, of woodland, meadow and the like, cannot but be excited at the vast amount of information that passes before his eyes. There are other valuable documents that provide evidence of past geographical conditions in many areas; but, more often than not, they are fragmentary and incomplete. If they are detailed, they usually cover only a small area. If they cover a larger area, they are far from detailed. But the Inquest of 1086 was carried out with a fairly high degree of uniformity over almost the whole of England, and the results give us today a unique opportunity of reconstructing some of the main features of the landscape of the eleventh century.

But there is another point of view. When this great wealth of data is examined more closely, perplexities and difficulties arise. The Domesday Book is far from being a straightforward document. It bristles with difficulties. Many of them have been resolved as the result of the activity of a long line of editors and commentators, working, more particularly, since the middle of the nineteenth century. The publication of J. H. Round’s *Feudal England*, in 1893, was a great landmark in the history of Domesday scholarship. But many problems still remain, some for ever insoluble. Moreover, the Domesday clerks themselves, as we shall see time and time again, were but human; they were frequently inaccurate or forgetful or confused. ‘No one’, wrote Round, ‘who has not analysed and collated such texts for himself can realise the extreme difficulty of avoiding occasional error. The abbreviations and the *formulae* employed in these surveys are so many pitfalls for the transcriber, and the use of Roman numerals is almost fatal to accuracy.’ Anyone who attempts an arithmetical exercise in Roman numerals will soon see something of the

difficulty that faced the clerks. Their work, for example, sometimes
convicts itself of inaccurate addition.

A casual reading of the text confronts us with obscurities, but once we
start to examine it more closely, other and more complicated problems
appear. The account of each shire presents its own difficulties. In
the light of all the uncertainties, it would be more correct to speak not of
‘the Domesday Geography of England’, but of ‘the Geography of the
Domesday Book’. The two may not have been quite the same thing, and
how near the record was to the reality of the time we can never know.
The gaps can never be filled; the perplexities may never be resolved. But
it is probably safe to assume that a picture of England based on the
Domesday Book, while neither complete nor accurate in all its details,
does reflect some of the major elements in the geography of the eleventh
century. The broader features of the land utilisation of the time emerge,
and with those we must be content. The remarkable thing after all is not
that there are tantalising obscurities, but that King William’s men did as
well as they did, considering the sheer difficulty of making a survey at
a time when the central government was without many of the aids we now
associate with the administrative machinery of an organised state.

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The story of the making of the Domesday survey is told briefly, but with
feeling, in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the year 1085:

Then at midwinter was the King at Gloucester with his wise men, and held
there his court five days. . . . Afterwards the King held a great council and very
deep speech with his wise men about this land, how it was held, and with what
men. He then sent his men over all England, into each shire, and caused them
to find out how many hundred hides were within that shire, and what the
King had himself of land and of cattle, and what rights he ought to have yearly
from that shire. Also he caused them to write down how much land belonged
to his archbishops, to his bishops, his abbots and his earls, and, though I tell
it at length, what or how much each man that was settled on the land in England
held in land and cattle, and how much it was worth. So very narrowly did he
cause the survey to be made that there was not a single hide nor yardland, nor—it
is shameful to relate that which he thought no shame to do—was there an
ox, or a cow or a swine left out, that was not set down in his writing. And
all these writings were brought to him afterwards.¹

1892–9).
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There is a contemporary account written by Robert Losinga, bishop of Hereford, who may have been present in the winter of 1085 when the project was discussed:

In the twentieth year of his reign by order of William, King of the English, there was made a description of the whole of England, of the lands of the several provinces thereof and of the possessions of all the great men. This was done in respect of ploughland and habitations, and of men both bond and free, both those who dwelt in cottages and those who had their homes and share in the fields, and in respect of ploughs and horses and other animals, and in respect, finally, of the services and payments due from all men in the whole land. Other investigations followed the first; and men were sent into provinces which they did not know, and where they themselves were unknown, in order that they might be given the opportunity of checking the first description and if necessary of denouncing its authors as guilty to the King.¹

Interesting though these and other contemporary accounts are, they do not throw much light upon the actual operation of compiling the original returns.² There are, however, other documents, besides the Domesday Book itself, that must have been composed in part from the original returns. It is true that these documents represent only fragments, but they throw much light upon the larger survey and they are of supreme importance in Domesday interpretation.³ Among the subsidiary documents is the so-called Exeter Domesday, covering Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, part of Dorset and one manor in Wiltshire. F. H. Baring, in 1912, showed that it was from this Exeter Domesday that the relevant portions of the main Domesday Book were made.⁴ In the process of making it, much was omitted, e.g. details of livestock (sheep, swine, etc.). Obviously, any account that is nearer to the original returns than the Domesday Book itself must be of very special interest.

Another of these subsidiary documents is the Inquisitio Eliensis, a survey of the estates of the abbey of Ely in the counties of Cambridge,

¹ W. H. Stevenson, ‘A Contemporary Description of the Domesday Survey’, English Historical Review (1907), xxii, p. 74; the translation is that of D. C. Douglas, see n. 3 below.
³ For the importance of these, see D. C. Douglas, ‘The Domesday Survey’, History (1936), xxvi, pp. 249–57.
Hertford, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk and Huntingdon. It opens with an explanatory paragraph which is usually regarded as referring to the operation of the survey:

This is the description of the inquiry concerning the lands which the King’s barons [i.e. the Domesday Commissioners] made according to the oath of the sheriff of the shire and of all the barons and their Frenchmen and of the whole hundred court—the priests, reeves and six villeins from every village. In the first place [they required] the name of the manor; who held it in the time of King Edward, and who holds it now, how many hides are there, how many ploughs in demesne and how many belonging to the men, how many villeins, cottars, serfs, freemen and sokemen; how much wood, meadow and pasture; how many mills and fisheries; how much has been added to or taken away from the estate; how much the whole used to be worth and how much it is worth now; and how much each freeman or sokeman had or has there; all this three times over, with reference to the time of King Edward, and to the time when King William gave the land, and to the present time. And if more can be got out of it than is obtained now.¹

Whether these were the ‘official instructions’ for all counties, we cannot say; but, at any rate, they, or a similar set of questions, must also have been asked elsewhere. Out of the representative assembly for each hundred a small body of eight jurors were chosen, and the I.E. gives a list of the jurors for a number of the hundreds in which the Ely estates lay. Round showed that half the jurors were English and the other half Norman. ‘Conquerors and conquered were alike bound by their common sworn verdicts.’² We cannot say whether the Commissioners themselves attended every hundred court as Round suggested,³ or whether, as Maitland thought, they merely held one session in the county town;⁴ but a number of entries make it clear that they sometimes heard conflicting evidence.⁵ There are also appendices dealing with disputes about ownership in several counties.

³ Ibid. pp. 118–19.
⁴ F. W. Maitland, Domesday Book and Beyond (Cambridge, 1897), p. 11.
⁵ For instance at the end of the account of Geoffrey de Mandeville’s manor of Chippenham there is this paragraph: ‘Orgar the sheriff himself had 3 hides of this land, and could give [it] to whom he would. Orgar put this land in pledge for 7 marks of gold and 2 ounces, as Geoffrey’s men say, but the men of the hundred have seen neither any writ nor any messenger of King Edward concerning it, nor do they [i.e. Geoffrey’s men] produce evidence’ (197).
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Interesting though the I.E. is, it is limited in the sense that it does not refer to all the lands in a particular hundred or area; moreover, in its present form it may date from as late as 1093. Even more interesting is the Inquisitio Comitatus Cantabrigiensis, which is a twelfth-century copy of a document from an early stage of the Inquest proceedings. It covers a large part of southern Cambridgeshire, and so gives us a complete picture of a substantial number of hundreds. At the beginning of the account of each hundred is a list of jurors, and then each village is described separately. Whatever the exact questions the Commissioners asked, it seems that they conducted their operations upon a geographical basis, county by county and hundred by hundred. Separate bodies of commissioners visited different groups of counties, and a number of attempts have been made to reconstruct their respective circuits according to differences in the phraseology of the record. R. W. Eyton in 1878 thought that the country was covered by nine circuits, each marked by a similarity of language. In 1906, Adolphus Ballard reduced them to seven. More recently, Carl Stephenson has also thought that there were 'at least seven', but has grouped the counties differently from Ballard.

These circuits did not cover the whole of England as we now know it. The northern counties of Northumberland, Durham, and most of Cumberland and Westmorland, were not surveyed. Lancashire likewise is not mentioned by name, but its southern portion is rather sketchily described in a sort of appendix to the Cheshire folios dealing with 'the lands between the Ribble and the Mersey', while much of its northern portion is included with the Yorkshire folios. A great deal of Rutland is described partly under Northamptonshire and partly under Lincolnshire. Finally, the four counties of the Welsh border—Gloucester, Hereford, Shropshire and Cheshire—included lands which are now parts of Wales or Monmouth. For some reason or other, the Domesday Book omits to give any account of some towns, including London and Winchester. In any case, the information about the towns it does describe is far from systematic or complete.

1 For the statistics of the I.E., see pp. 99–101 below.
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What was the purpose of the Inquest? The older generation of scholars, including Round and Maitland, believed that its main object was fiscal, and that King William wished to collect data about the distribution of the geld with a view to correcting anomalies by a new assessment. Thus Maitland, speaking of the Domesday Book itself, wrote: ‘One great purpose seems to mould both its form and substance; it is a geld-book.’

More recent work, however, has laid greater emphasis upon its feudal and judicial character. Its object, according to Professor V. H. Galbraith, was ‘a return by manors and by tenants-in-chief’.

As Sir Frank Stenton has said, ‘in the last resort the one motive which will adequately explain so great an undertaking is the Conqueror’s desire to learn the essential facts about his kingdom... In searching for the ultimate purpose of the Survey, it is unnecessary to go behind the contemporary opinion that it was undertaken because the king wished to know more about England—“how it was peopled, and with what sort of men”.

In this connection it is interesting to note the view held by Richard Fitz-Neal, Treasurer of England, who wrote within a century of its compilation (c. 1179). As Professor Galbraith has pointed out, he quotes a man whose memory went back to within a generation of the Inquest:

The book about which you inquire is an inseparable companion of the royal seal in the Treasury: and how this came about, as I was told by Henry, formerly Bishop of Winchester, was as follows:

When William the Conqueror (a blood relation of Bishop Henry) had subdued the whole island, and by terrible examples tamed the minds of the rebels, to prevent further trouble he decided to place the government of the conquered people on a written basis and to subject them to the rule of law. The laws of the English were therefore considered, according to their three-fold division—the Mercian Law, the Dane Law and the West Saxon Law. Some of these were discarded and some approved, with the addition of such of the imported laws of Neustria as would most effectually keep the peace. Finally, to round off the work, after consulting his council, he sent men of proved discretion on circuit through the Kingdom. A careful description (descriptio) was made of the whole country by these men, of its woods, pastures, and meadows, employing the ordinary agricultural terminology. This was gathered

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1 F. W. Maitland, op. cit. p. 3.
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into a book so that every man, sure of his own right, should not usurp that of another. This description was done by counties, by hundreds and by hides—beginning with the name of the king at the head and then one by one the names of the other great men who held in chief of the king according to their rank. These were all numbered consecutively so that one can more easily refer to what concerned each in the body of the book. This book is called by the natives Domesday—that is, metaphorically speaking, the day of judgement.¹

And so it has been known ever since, although the word never appears in the Book itself.

The preliminary work of collecting the facts and of arranging them preparatory to the making of the Domesday Book must have been immense. One view is that the information was sent to the king’s treasury at Winchester, and there summarised and rearranged. Round suggested that the returns for Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk were summarised first, and that when the compilers saw how large and unwieldy the result was, they decided to continue the summary for the rest of England in a simpler manner. Hence, according to this view, the distinction between the main Domesday Book (known as vol. 1 or as the Exchequer Domesday) and the Little Domesday Book covering the three eastern counties, and known as vol. II.²

Professor Galbraith, however, regards the process of summarising as being more complicated. He believes that local summaries on a feudal basis were made for groups of counties, and that it was these, and not the original returns, that were submitted to Winchester for final assembling and editing: ‘the transforming of the geographical return into a feudal return was done not, as is generally assumed, at Winchester, but locally and hard upon, if not actually during the actual inquest’.³ The so-called Exeter or Exon Domesday would thus be the first draft of the local summary for the south-west.⁴ Professor Galbraith disagrees with Round about the Little Domesday Book. This, he suggests, occupies an intermediate position between the Exeter Domesday and the main Domesday Book,

² J. H. Round, op. cit. p. 141.
³ V. H. Galbraith, loc. cit. p. 166. This view, however, is contested by Professor D. C. Douglas in The Domesday Monachorum of Christ Church Canterbury (London, 1944), pp. 19 et seq.
⁴ See p. 3 above.
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‘and it is tempting to explain it as the fair copy sent by the commission to Winchester, the original draft of which (corresponding to Exon Domesday) has disappeared’. The stages in the making of the digest we now have might therefore have been as follows:

(1) The information collected in terms of manors, villages and hundreds, and sent to some local centre.
(2) Rearrangement of the returns on a feudal basis made locally for each circuit (Exeter Domesday).
(3) A fair copy (or revision) of the local summary, sent to Winchester (Little Domesday Book).
(4) Main Domesday Book compiled from the local summaries.

Mr R. Welldon Finn believes that the Inquest was perhaps started before the Gloucester meeting in the winter of 1085, and that many Domesday entries bear the mark of a double enquiry—on a geographical and a feudal basis respectively. ‘This may be due to either or both the following causes: the despatch of more than one set of Commissioners on each circuit, mentioned by Bishop Robert Losinga, or the provision of both hundredal and feudal returns and their comparison. It is however improbable that all landowners recorded in Domesday Book made a return for their own fees, possible that only those who had an obligation to supply milites for the feudal host did so.’ The first enquiry may have been made in 1084–5, and its results discussed at the Gloucester Gemot. The second enquiry (perhaps that on a feudal basis) checked and examined discrepancies about ownership. In the meantime the results of the first enquiry had been, or were being, digested into a number of local summaries, and these were amended in the light of the second enquiry. ‘It is certainly significant that almost all the material, in the Exeter Domesday, which deals with dispute about ownership, illegal occupation, and similar topics, comes at the end of the appropriate manorial account or is marginal, interlined, or postscriptual.’ It is, for the most part, likewise situated in the Exchequer text. The local summaries, of which the Exeter Domesday Book and the Little Domesday Book are examples, may have been the ‘writings’ which, according to the Chronicle, were brought to the king. From them, perhaps, the Exchequer Domesday was made.²

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The length of time taken over the process of compilation and the date of the Domesday Book itself are also controversial matters. Some place it not long after King William’s death in 1087;¹ others place its final completion not before 1100.²

Whatever the stages of compilation, the fact remains that the result was very different from the original returns. The new form was more condensed, and, for example, the information about stock was omitted. But apart from this general condensation, there was a much more fundamental difference. Compare, for instance, the account of the Cambridgeshire village of Abington Pigotts as given in the I.C.C. and in the Domesday Book itself. In the I.C.C. there is a clear statement about the village.³ It was rated at 5 hides, made up as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Hides</th>
<th>Virgates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hugh Pincerna holds of the bishop of Winchester</td>
<td>2 ¹/₂</td>
<td>½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The King</td>
<td>¹</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph and Robert hold of Harduin de Scalers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 ¹/₂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earl Roger</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picot the sheriff</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>¹/₂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alwin Hamelecoc the beadle holds of the king</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>¹/₂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Domesday Book, however, there is no such account of Abington Pigotts. The information has been rearranged under the headings of the main landholders of the county. We have therefore to turn to a number of folios to assemble the details for Abington Pigotts, and not until all are assembled do we know that it was a 5-hide vill. The contrast between the account of Abington Pigotts in the I.C.C. and that in Domesday Book can be seen on pp. 10 and 11. The geographical basis of the original returns has been destroyed, and their information reconstituted upon a feudal basis. For Cambridgeshire, as for other counties, the royal estates are first described; then those of the ecclesiastical lords, first the bishops then the abbots; then again, those of the lay lords; and finally

In hoc hundredo Abintona pro v hidis se defendit tempore regis edwardi. Et modo pro iii. Et de his v hidis tenet hugo pincerna de episcopo Walkelino Wintoniensis ii hidas et dimidiam et dimidiam virgatam. v carucis est ibi terra, iii carucae in dominio et ii carucae villanis. ix bordarii, iii cotarii, unusquisque v acris. Pratum v carucis et ii solidis. iii animalia ociosa, lii oves, xxxi porci, i runcinus. In totis valentiis valet vii libras et quando recepit lx solidos, tempore regis edwardi viii libras. Hoc manerium iacet et iacuit in ecclesia sancti petri Wintoniensis. Et in hoc manerio fuit quidam sochemannus qui tenuit dimidiam virgatam sub archiepiscopo stigando tempore regis edwardi. Potuit recedere et vendere cui voluit absque ejus licentia. Et de his v hidis tenet rex dimidiam hidam quae iacet in liltintona. i carucae est ibi terra, et est caruca. Et haec dimidia hida est appretiata cum liltintona. Et de his v hidis tenet Radulphus et Robertus de Hardeuino i hidam et virgatam et dimidiam. ii carucis est ibi terra, et sunt ibi carucae. v bordarii. Pratum iii bobus. i animal ociosum. quatuor xx oves. lxvii porci. unus runcinus. Inter totum valet lv solidos et quando recepit xxv solidos, tempore regis edwardi lx solidos. Hanc terram tenuerunt ii sochemanni, homines comitis algari fuerunt. potuerunt dare et vendere cui voluerunt tempore regis edwardi. Et tertius sochemannus, homo regis edwardi, unam virgatam et inveniebat i averam vicecomiti regis. Et de his v hidis comes Rogerus i virgatam quae iacet in sceninge i in proprio suo manerio. xiii solidos et iii denarios valet et semper valuit. Hanc terram tenuit goda homo comitis algari. Et de his v hidis tenet picotus vicecomes dimidiam virgatam. ii bobus est terra. Haec terra valuit et valet ii solidos. Hanc terram tenuit osgotus de archiepiscopo stigando et iacet semper et iacuit in morduna. De his v hidis tenet aluinus hameleoc de bedellus Regis dimidiam virgatam de rege. iii bobus est terra ibi. Et sunt ibi. unus porcus. v solidos valet, tempore regis edwardi x solidos, et istemet tenuit tempore regis edwardi non potuit dare nec vendere extra Liltintonam.